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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: IRF REACTIONS: MFA GETS NASTY, ROC NICE

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Classified By: DCM Eric Rubin; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Reactions to the 2009 International Religious Freedom Report (IRF) varied among official entities, indicating that not all of Russian officialdom had compared talking points before hitting the airwaves. In a scathing communique, the MFA sneered that "it seems that the authors decided not to bother themselves with releasing updated information." The MFA statement went on to call the IRF "a politically biased document distorting facts," which "deliberately misrepresents" the GOR's stellar record protecting religious freedom. Russia pursues its policy of protecting this freedom, the MFA huffed, "not in order to win the U.S. Department of State's approval," but simply because it is the right thing to do. Since other countries may not be familiar with Russia's long tradition of inter-faith harmony, the MFA kindly offered to "try to help them" understand.

¶2. (C) As an example of Russia's protection of religious rights, the MFA statement alluded to the GOR's recent resolution in the UN's Human Rights Council defending "traditional values," and chided the U.S. for not supporting the resolution, which passed over U.S. objections. We conveyed U.S. concerns to Andrey Lanchikov of the MFA's Department for Human Rights and Humanitarian Cooperation in July when Russia first brought up the "traditional values" resolution (ref A). Referring to the IRF on October 29, Lanchikov told us that "of course, we are open to criticism," but that such reports "give the impression that the U.S. wants to teach Russia" about religious freedom, which he saw as counterproductive. He added that he saw continued dialogue, in a less public context, as productive.

¶3. (C) The MFA statement, however, was the only jarring note in among official responses. The Interfax news agency, under the October 28 headline, "Russian Government Promotes Religious Freedom in Russia -- U.S. Department of State," led with the statement that "the U.S. Department of State has given high marks to the role of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia in ensuring religious freedom in Russia." Public Chamber member Vsevolod Chaplin, head of the Synodal department of relations between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and society, told Interfax on October 28 that "for several years in a row now, one may see progress" in the Report, which increasingly "describes quite accurately the situation in Russia," both as regards the legal system of relations between the state and religious associations, and the structures that exist to maintain a dialogue between the state and religious communities. In a conversation with us on October 29, ROC External Affairs Deputy head Father Filip Ryabykh defended Russia's policy -- criticized in the report -- of marginalizing certain minority religions, saying that "a state cannot help but react," in a measured way, to possible negative influences on young people, and noting that other European countries have pursued similar initiatives. Ryabykh added that the ROC is willing to work with any U.S. initiative promoted "in a spirit of brotherhood."

14. (C) As one might expect, minority religious representatives praised the report, as did organizations that frequently criticize the GOR's record on religious freedom. For example, the Slavic Center for Law and Justice (SCLJ) issued a press release which quoted extensively from the IRF and took a number of potshots at Alexander Dvorkin, expert on "cults" and head of the GOR-created Russian Association of Religious and Cultic Studies Centers, which has spearheaded the campaign against non-traditional religious groups. Anatoliy Pchelinstev, who runs the SCLJ, told us that he found the IRF "thorough and accurate." Gleb Yakunin, who runs the religious freedom portal credo.ru, told PolOff that he saw the report as "an encouraging sign" that "the reset has not changed U.S. policy." Yaroslav Sivulsky of the Jehovah's Witnesses thanked us for our support of their rights, and asked us to keep up the pressure on the GOR. Media liberals also gave the report a positive evaluation; for example, the October 29 edition of the moderately liberal daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta editorialized, "The Americans have become more objective in their assessment of religious freedom in Russia."

Comment

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15. (C) The reference in the MFA statement to the "traditional values" resolution is telling. Many observers both inside and outside of Russia continue to believe that, under the guise of protecting the Russia's "traditional values," the GOR is engaged in a campaign to deny the rights of those who deviate from "traditional values," including religious minorities. Notwithstanding the MFA's complaint about the

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Report's redundancy, most of the updated information in the Report concerns disturbing new developments, such as the creation of Dvorkin's commission against "cults," and the escalation of GOR attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses. We will use upcoming meetings at the MFA to discuss these issues in more detail, and to bring the dialogue to a more useful level than that found in the MFA communique.  
Beyrle